NC CROSSROADS

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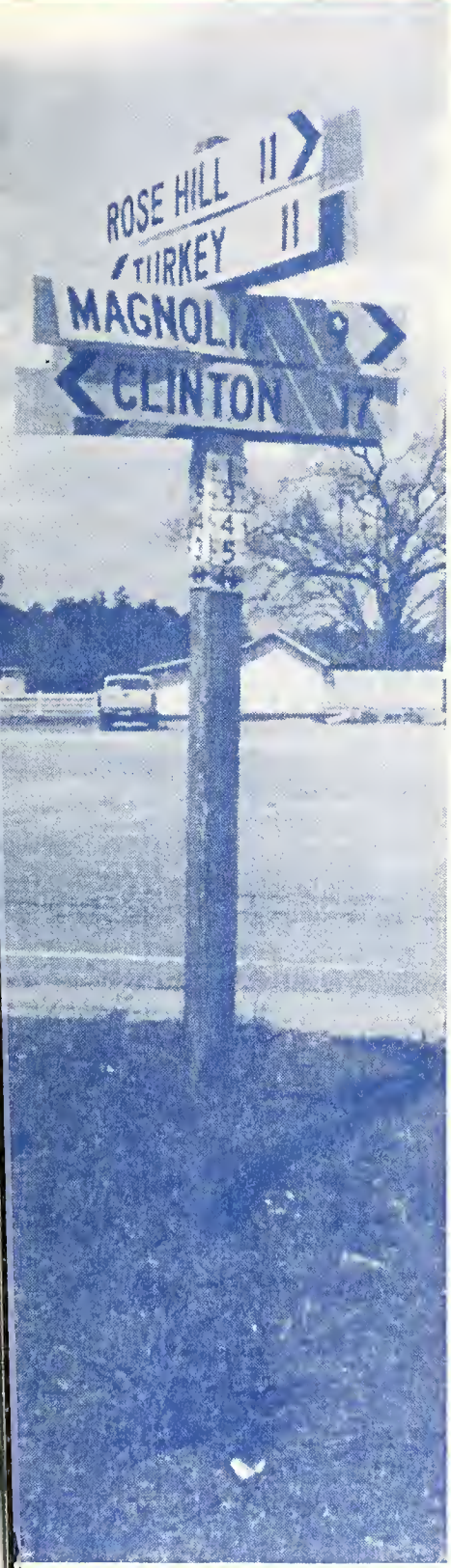

MIGRATIONS

The Jewish Settlers of Eastern North Carolina

by Leonard Rogoff

Fleeing war, persecution, and poverty, Jewish immigrants sought freedom and opportunity in the United States. After first settling in port cities, some then headed south. By the late nineteenth century they had created communities in towns like Wilson, Goldsboro, Tarboro, and Fayetteville. Now many of these communities are reduced to a few elderly members.

In 1996 my wife Joan and I started a Jewish congregation in Chapel Hill, the town's first. We had people but little else. We needed chairs and prayer books, Bibles and a Torah scroll. Chapel Hill is in the Sunbelt, which means that our community is new and growing. While we were planting roots, I heard tell of small towns down east where Jewish communities were dying. The children and grandchildren of peddlers and storekeepers had found careers and new homes in places like Charlotte, Atlanta, and Raleigh-Durham. Century-old synagogues were closing. Goldsboro's wondrous Romanesque Revival synagogue, built in 1886, no longer had enough worshipers to hold a service. An empty lot marked the site of Tarboro's 1892 synagogue. It had been rented to a church and then demolished when its roof collapsed. Lumberton's Temple Beth El was now a Baptist church, and its books and furniture were warehoused. Wilson's Temple Beth El was being sold to a neighbor who intended to convert it into a private home. Jews in Weldon and Kinston were aging, dying, or moving on.

I'd borrow a truck, and with my friend Barry Fine went on a religious quest into a terra incognita, the small-town Jewish South. We'd cross a railroad track into a sleepy downtown. A few stores were still open, but otherwise the once bustling streetscape was a ghostly scene of boarded-up buildings, thrift shops, and storefront churches. On the abandoned stores, above the "For Rent" signs, were the names of the former proprietors, sometimes Jewish names like Adler, Marks, Leder, Epstein, Kittner, Oettinger....

I visited homes, sat, and talked to find out what it was like to be the lone, or one of the few, Jewish families in Clinton or Weldon. Southern Jews looked familiar, like my own family up North, but their accents drawled and their manners reflected the grace and softness of southern breeding. I had lived in the South long enough—34 years—to recognize the southerness of their character, the down-home courtesy and hospitality, but I also could sense the Jewish bond, the comfort and familiarity we all feel when we're among our own. They were warm and vital, quick to laugh at the irony of their situation as Jews. Despite the tightness and longevity of their local bonds, they still felt different, and their community extended across oceans to global Jewry. Jerusalem was "home" as well as Greenville or Rocky Mount.

At the temple we'd meet an elderly resident who recounted nostalgically the old days when children filled the Sunday school, the women cooked *kugel* [noodle pudding] for community dinners, and their parents or grandparents shouldered the burden of community. They'd introduce us to other local Jews, lifelong friends who were more like brothers and sisters. Often, in fact, they were in-laws or distant cousins. Barry, a native Virginian and Chapel Hill graduate, quickly drew kinship, friendship, and alumni ties. Southern Jews are an extended family.

In storerooms and social halls we'd find piles of black-covered, half-Hebrew, half-English prayer books dating to the 1940s. With their "thees" and "thous" and their gender insensitivity, these books deserved the honor of a proper ritual burial. Sometimes we'd pull from a stack or carton a far older tome, musty with age or brittle from disuse. Printed in Warsaw, Moscow, or Vienna, these Hebrew prayer books and Talmudic commentaries told the stories of immigrants from a century ago. They were remnants of a devout belief that did not survive the generations, that was discarded in modern America.

Washington Horse Exchange Co.
B. L. SUSMAN, President
B. L. SUSMAN
EXCHANGE
WASHINGTON
HORSES AND MULES BOUGHT DIRECT FROM THE WEST
WE SAVE YOU THE OTHER FELLOW'S PROFIT
FEEDSTUFFS GROWN ON OUR OWN FARMS
FARM IMPLEMENTS AND MACHINERY OF BEST MAKES
WAGONS AND HARNESS, BUGGIES AND SURREYS

Courtesy of Brown Library

Washington, NC, circa 1913.

Other books, too, opened a door into the folklife of a vanished people: Yiddish translations of Émile Zola or Guy de Maupassant bespoke a cosmopolitan culture. The children's books revealed generational changes. The dull Hebrew primers of the early 1900s, with their black and white prints of patriarchs and matriarchs, yielded in the post World War II years to brightly illustrated textbooks of baseball-playing kids with names like Judy and Jerry.

Photo courtesy of NC Division of Archives on History

Gertrude Weil, circa 1885.

I had a sense of resurrecting the dead, of bringing buried names back to life. I scoured libraries and archives to learn what documents, newspapers, and histories said about these communities. I'd wander the cemeteries reading the weathered stones that listed birthplaces in Prussia and Bavaria. I read of Solomon Fishblate, who had served as mayor of Wilmington in the 1870s and '90s. I found credit reports on the Bloomingdales, who had peddled and opened stores around Wilson in the 1840s and '50s before heading to New York and department-store immortality. A librarian in Washington, NC, sent me a photo of Ben Susman, circa 1913, standing with a motley crowd before his Washington Horse Exchange Co. I located a copy of a *ketubah* [a wedding contract] of Max Bloom, a Lithuanian immigrant who had fallen sick while peddling in Halifax County in the early 1900s. Nursed to health by a farmer's daughter, he fell in love, took her to the Wilmington rabbi who converted her to Judaism, and then married her. I perused the collected papers, biographies, and academic studies of Gertrude Weil, the sprightly Goldsboro suffragette and civil rights activist who, though she has been dead for twenty years, seemed very much alive. Invited to "bring her neighbors" to a gubernatorial candidate's reception at a segregated hotel, Miss Gertrude marched in with the African Americans who had moved into her changing neighborhood. "You said to bring the neighbors, didn't you?" she told the startled onlookers.

I also met Jews who seemed less familiar, the first families who were descended from German immigrants of antebellum days. Weils, Cones, Oettingers, Bluethenthals, and Rosenthals had Confederates in their attics. These were elegant, courteous, and thoroughly acculturated Southerners. Alex Katzenstein spun yarns about his grandfather, who came to Selma in the 1870s to pan for gold. Standing in a field between his grandpa's cotton gin and tobacco barn, Alex regaled me with stories of horse racing and possums in trees. Scooping some Warren County soil in his hand, he explained why this dirt makes good sweet potatoes. He took me to a small pine grove outside Warrenton where his grandfather had a rabbi demarcate a cemetery. Alex wanted to lie there someday with his family, but who would care for the graves when everyone was gone?

I realized that if these stories weren't written down, these places located, these artifacts and photographs collected, the history of Jews in eastern North Carolina would die with their communities. Some books and artifacts could be returned to life in new congregations like ours while others needed preservation and archival protection. Lenora Ucko of Durham's Museum of the Jewish Family (MJF) realized at once the significance of this endeavor. With assistance from the North Carolina Humanities Council, we developed the traveling exhibit, "Migrations: The Jewish Settlers of Eastern North Carolina." To realize this vision the MJF reinvented itself as the Rosenzweig Museum and Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina. This foundation is expanding its mission to document and preserve, and, even more significantly, to tell about the Jewish South.

The stories collected here do tell about the Jewish South. They also tell a classic American tale, one repeated again and again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and one that continues to occur today as new immigrants arrive in North Carolina.

My father was walking to synagogue on Yom Kippur—this was early on in Goldsboro—and a farmer stopped him on the street.

"I went by your store and it was closed," the farmer said, "I came to pay up my bill."

"I'm awfully sorry, but today is my holiest day, and I can't accept your money," my father told him.

"You mean you won't take my money. I won't be back 'til spring," the farmer said.

"I'll have to wait until spring," my father said. My father felt that was the turning point [of Heilig-Meyers Furniture Company] because people used to come into the store, and they would say, "I only want that holy man to wait on me."

Amy Meyers Krumbein, Goldsboro

Photo by Hymon Meyers

William Heilig and Joseph Max Meyers were two Lotvian immigronts who settled in Galdsboro in the early 1900s. Here, William Heilig ond his nephew Mondel Kadis sit frant af their first store. From Goldsbara, Heilig-Meyers grew inta the world's largest furniture dealer with 2,700 stares.

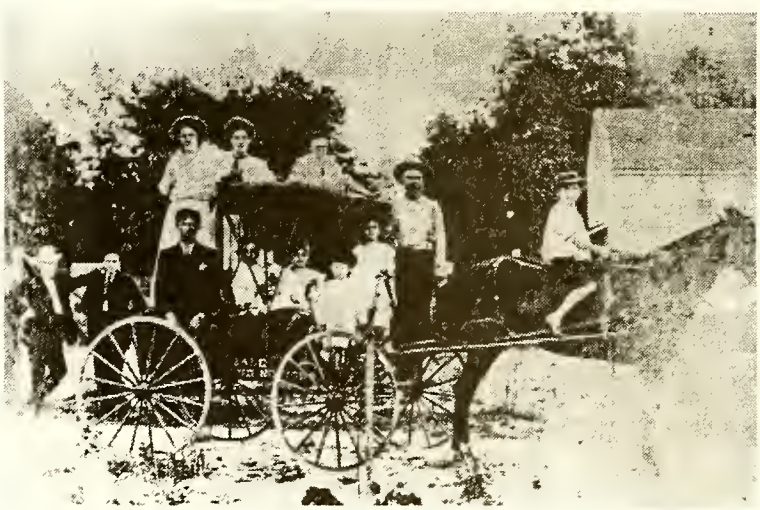

Photo by William Shrago

A.M. Shraga's dry gaads and natians buggy draws a Galdsbara crowd in 1908. His son Horry sits on the horse while his children Joke, Mannah, Ida, and Rachel sit inside.

My late grandfather, A. M. Shrago, settled in Edenton in the early 1890s before moving to Wayne County in 1893. Grandfather immigrated as a refugee Jew to escape the slave conscription of the Russian Czar. He was without funds and had no control of the English language. He first settled in Baltimore, as he told me, and saved a few pennies by carrying coal on his back in the winter and ice on his back in the summer. Various entrepreneurs in Baltimore financed young refugee Jews to go forth to the countryside and peddle merchandise from a pack on their back. He related to me how the people of the countryside around Edenton bedded him for the night and cooperated with him on his kosher diet. Grandpa saved his pennies and purchased a wagon stocked with merchandise and a team of horses to ply his trade. He moved to Goldsboro in 1893 after a crop failure around Edenton and rumors of a bumper crop in Wayne County. He financed some of his kin to immigrate from the tyranny of Czarist Russia.

William Shrago, Goldsboro and Rocky Mount

My aunt [Selma Katzenstein] wanted to be a doctor, but her health was somewhat fragile. My father bought her a five-foot shelf of Harvard classics, and she became very well educated. She learned farming from her father, and in his later years when his health was no longer what it had been, she shouldered more and more responsibilities of the farm. She had a couple thousands of acres. She said that she liked to "see the wheel turn over," meaning she liked the four seasons: from preparing the plant bed all the way through the development and harvesting of the crop, the sale of the crop, she liked to see the whole cycle of the thing. Farming was in her blood and she just ate it up.

Alex Katzenstein, Warren Plains

Photo by Alex Kotzenstein

Selma Katzenstein managed mare than twenty tenant farms in Warren County. She raised cottan, tabacca and sweet patataes.

Well, being a Jewish Southerner, everywhere I go, you know, people say, "Are you Jewish?"

"Yes," I say.

"There are no Jews in the South," they tell me.

We are quite a minority here, but I still think of myself as a Southerner. I am from the South. I was born here. Being Jewish makes you a little different. I'm the only Jewish member of the Rotary Club. I'm the only Jewish member of several boards that I am on.

Photo by Leonard Rogoff

Steven Leder at the last store of the family chain in Wilsan.

At one time we had 21 stores in North Carolina and South Carolina. This [Wilson store] is the last of the Leder Brothers stores. I think partly that's [why] I want to keep the legacy. I see rich people, poor people, black, white, Hispanic, every kind of person in the world comes into the business. It's really nice. It keeps you in touch with America.

Steven Leder, Wilson

Photo by Tom Ronkin

Goldsboro's Temple Oheb Sholom still stands, but the town's Jewish community has all but disappeared.

On January 1, 1887, the Goldsboro *Argus* reported the dedication of Temple Oheb Sholom. Eleven-year-old Edna Weil presented a key to Temple President Adolph Lehman and read this speech:

Long may this temple stand through the course of time. May religious harmony and zeal, while it lasts, endure among its worshipers. While our beautiful city, Goldsboro, increases in wealth and refinement and makes religion and education the object of her culture, may this edifice stand among its sister churches, which point their spires to heaven, as an evidence of the devotion of the Hebrew community of Goldsboro to the truth of their faith, and of their regard for the reputation of their city for moral and intellectual elevation. Mr. President, on behalf of the congregation, I present to you the key ta this temple.

Many of the farmers would beg Eli [Nachamson] to speak Yiddish for them, just to hear the sounds, and some would bring their families in for a blessing in Hebrew, the tongue of the Israelites. Eli would receive them all piously, as the direct descendant of Isaiah and Moses, the same blood as Jesus, and raise his hands solemnly while they all squeezed their eyes tightly shut. He would sing out a beautiful *bruchah* [blessing] in his best tenor, just like on the Caruso albums he owned.

Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South*

Photo courtesy of Eli Evans

Eli and Jennie Nachamsan, who lived in Dover and Kinstan, had eight doughters. When a san was barn, Kinston's citizens haisted Eli on their shoulders and held a tarchlight parade.

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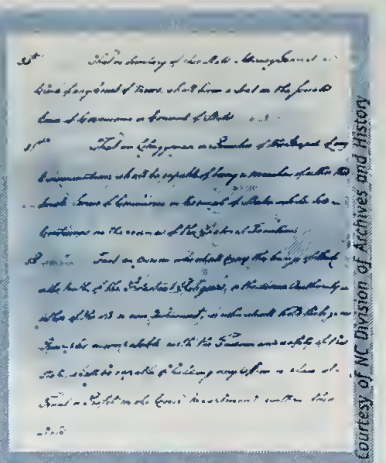
I was born and raised here all my life. Do I consider myself a Southerner? Yes, I would like to consider myself a Southerner. I don't know what the definition of a Southerner is unless you say that he lives in the southern part of the United States. I don't know how you define it. You know, if you live in a town, you're bound to get involved with the mores and folkways, where else you gonna have friends, there wasn't enough selection of Jewish gals in a small town. And you had to go to school right there with all of them. Anything is better in a smaller town because you're not a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in a smaller town. In a smaller town everybody knows what everybody else's business is. What they got in the pot. What goes on. You don't have that same in a larger town, like Norfolk or Richmond.

You may have lost a lot of the characteristics of a northern Jew because they lived in a ghetto primarily, as I see it. They were self sufficient. They had their own schools. The lifestyle of a person in New York is rush, rush, but they aren't going nowhere. It's always the hurry-up deal.

Everything in life has advantages and disadvantages. That's my opinion. Are you going to be happy with your own religious cohorts or are you not? I've always been a loyal Jew. I'm not one who comes to synagogue every Friday night, but I consider myself a loyal Jew. Having lived in the South really strengthened it. One thing about the Christians, they won't let you forget that you're a Jew. They'll remind you of that. So you may as well as go ahead and know it. You have to know a lot about Judaism to answer their questions. You become a more tolerant person, really. It doesn't faze you. A lot of people don't want to be a Jew for a multiple of reasons. I never had that feeling. A southern Jew is more assimilated. He learns to thrive in a different environment. That's about the size of it.

Morris Brody, Greenville

The North Carolina State Constitution of 1776 contained a religious test that limited public office to Protestants. In 1808 Jacob Henry, o Jew from Beaufort, was elected to the stote legislature to represent Carteret County. A year later another legislator submitted a resolution thot chollenged Henry's nght to serve. In on eloquent speech Henry defended religious liberty ond wos allowed to retoin his seot. The religious test wos changed to "Christian" in 1821 and wos removed oltogether in 1868.



Courtesy of NC Division of Archives and History

Section XXXII.

That no person who shall deny the being of God, or the truth of the [Protestant] Religion, or the divine authority either of the Old or New Testament, or who shall hold religious principles incompatible with the freedom and safety of the State, shall be capable of holding any office, or place of trust or profit in the Civil department within this State.

North Carolina State Constitution, 1776

It is therefore made known, that a certain Jacob Henry, a Member of this House, denies the divine authority of the New-Testament, and refused to take the Oath prescribed by Law, for this qualification, in violation of the Constitution of the State_____

Resolved, that the said Jacob Henry is not entitled to a seat in this Assembly, and that the same be vacated._____

Resolution of the North Carolina House of Commons, 5th Decr 1809

The religion I profess, inculcates every duty which man owes to his fellow men; it enjoins upon its votaries, the practice of every virtue, and the detestation of every vice; it teaches them to hope for the favor of heaven exactly in proportion as their lives are directed by just, honorable and beneficent maxims___ This then Gentlemen is my Creed; it was impressed upon my infant mind, it has been the director of my youth, the monitor of my manhood, and will I trust be the Consolation of my old age. At any rates Gentlemen, I am sure that you cannot see, any thing in this religion, To deprive me of my seat in this House....

I have never considered it my duty to prye into the belief of my fellow citizens or neighbours, if their actions are upright and their conduct just, the rest is for their own consideration not for mine. I do not seik to make converts to my faith, whatever it may be esteemed in the eyes of my officious friend, nor do I exclude any man from my esteem or friendship, because he and I differ in that respeck___ The same charity therefore it is not unreasonable to expect will be extended to myself, because in all things that relate to the State and to the duties of civil life, I am bound by the same obligations, with my fellow citizens.

Jacob Henry, Beaufort

There was a committee there in New Bern, they called it the committee of 100. I don't know how many people put $100 into a pot to get some industry started. And they were having a big affair, which was a pig pickin'. Every time Harry went to a meeting he would give a *motzi* [the Hebrew blessing over bread that begins a meal]. This is what it was with other Jewish men there. They'd go to a Chamber of Commerce meeting, anywhere there was food. The Christians sort of loved the fact that there were Hebrew words. So they had this big affair at this warehouse. They said that Harry Vatz will now do the blessing. They put him on an elevator and pushed him way up in the air, and he said, "I guarantee you in the history of the world a Hebrew blessing has never been done before on a pig." And then he said the motzi. Well, there were 200 people, and they went wild.

Isabel Vatz, New Bern

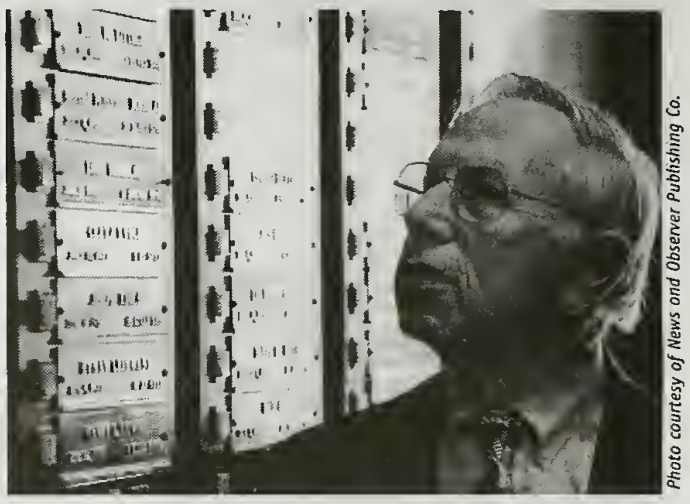


Photo courtesy of News and Observer Publishing Co.

Harry Kittner stands before the memorial plaques at Weldon's Temple Emanu-El, which will soan clase its daars.

What's to happen to our temple? What's going to happen to the scrolls, the Torahs, the stained glass windows? But the big thing is, what will happen to the memorial plaques, the *yahrzeit* tablets? In the Jewish religion, in the synagogues, you erect a memorial tablet with a nameplate of a person saying when they were born and when they died. On the anniversary of that person's death, a candle is lit, usually for 24 hours. You say a memorial prayer, the *kaddish*, a prayer praising God. I would like to give all our artifacts and funds to a new small congregation that needs them. Maybe they would preserve our memorial plaques and say a prayer in memory of our dead.

Harry Kittner, Weldon

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Photo courtesy of the New Hanover County Library

The Temple of Israel, dedicated in 1876, is North Carolina's first synagogue. Its architecture is Moorish.

On February 21, 1886, Front Street Methodist Church in Wilmington burned. Two days later the rabbi and directors of Temple of Israel wrote to the church board offering their synagogue as a sanctuary. The church met at the temple for two years. When the new church opened, a member, Alfred Galloway Hankins, wrote this poem to thank the Jewish community.

FAREWELL TO THE TEMPLE OF ISRAEL

O Israel's beauteous Temple thou
Again we at thy altar bow
But while we strive our voice to raise
In choral notes of prayer and praise.

We're filled with joy and sadness too:
This holy day we part from you.
For two long happy years and more
You welcomed us with open door.

Within thy sacred walls we found
True and unselfish love to abound
O can it e'er forgotten be,
The day of our calamity:

That Sabbath day which dawned so bright
Brought sadness deep and dark 'fore night
And midst the ruin of the day
Old Front Street Church in ashes lay.

We set us down our loss to mourn
Homeless, weary, sad and lone.
O God! we look for help to Thee
In this our dire necessity.

God heard our cry and felt our grief
And Israel came to bring relief,
"No longer weep," say they "and mourn
Our Temple now shall be thy home."

We went and found that God was there.
And Jesus oft hath met us here.
O May His spirit ne'er depart
But take possession of each heart.

Today we take our final leave.
To part with thee our heart doth grieve
Thy roof has sheltered us so long
It seems like we are leaving home.

To our new home our footsteps turn,
With gratitude our hearts doth burn:
Forgetting sorrows of the way,
That joyful end in brightening day.

We'll ne'er forget our sojourn here
And Israel's seed that worship there
Thy blessings rich, O God send down
And Israel's head with glory crown.

Lewis Philip Hall, *Land of the Golden River, Vol. 2* (Wilmington: Lewis Philip Hall, 1980), 197-8.

Leonard Rogoff

Migrations Research Historian

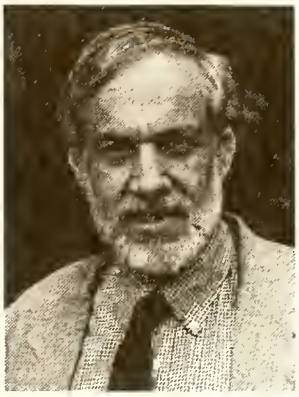

Photo by John Rosenthal

Leonard Rogoff has written and lectured extensively on the Jewish South with a focus on North Carolina. After receiving his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina, Rogoff served as Associate Professor of English at North Carolina Central University. Editor of *The Rambler, Newsletter of the Southern Jewish Historical Society*, he has presented his original research to both popular and academic audiences. His essays on Jewry have appeared in *American Jewish History; Southern Jewish History; Jewish-American History and Culture: An Encyclopedia; Contemporary Jewish-American Novelists, Dramatists, and Poets; The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Block Civil Rights; Handbook to North Carolina History;* and *The Companion to Southern Literature.* He is the author of *Homelands: Southern-Jewish Identity in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina.*

MIGRATIONS EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

Fayetteville	March 18–May 23, 2001
Greenville	Sept. 12–Nov. 21, 2001
Greensboro	Dec. 16, 2001–Feb. 24, 2002
Durham	TBA
Goldsboro	TBA

Call NCHC for details.

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